GOP Plans Would Reshuffle Science

Budget resolutions seek to cut NIH, eliminate the Commerce Department, and end social science research at NSF. But they are only the first word in the debate

Ever since Republicans won control of Congress last November with a promise to slash government spending, scientists have been waiting fearfully to see how deeply the ax would gouge their programs. They got a glimpse of the potential damage last week, and it wasn't reassuring. Budget committees in the House and Senate approved separate versions of a resolution, designed to eliminate the federal deficit by 2002, that would also shake up the federal science establishment.

Depending on which version you choose, the proposals would chop up to $1 billion from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) next year alone; dismantle industrial research programs in the Department of Commerce; eliminate the Department of Energy (DOE), leaving its research programs with an uncertain future; severely cut funding for an Earth monitoring system planned by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA); and do away with the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) support for social, behavioral, and economic science.

Sparring partners. The budgets drawn up by Senator Pete Domenici (R–NM), left, and Representative John Kasich (R–OH) differ on the fate of the Energy Department, but agree that applied research efforts should get the budget ax and that basic research should be held flat after initial cuts. Overall, however, science and technology fare better in the plan than do many domestic programs.

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Alarming as that prospect may be when viewed from the laboratory bench, many other government programs get even harsher treatment. And researchers can take comfort from the fact that these proposals are the first, not the final, word on government spending in 1996 and beyond. The bills must be approved by the House and Senate and their huge differences ironed out in conference. Even then, the budget resolution simply provides a framework for the 26 appropriations subcommittees in the House and Senate, which fiercely defend their prerogative to wield the ax independently. Nevertheless, the bills approved last week indicate where the battle lines will be drawn—and how intense the budget wars will be in the months ahead.

The House and Senate disagree on precisely how to restructure federal science. The House version, for example—which would cut $1.4 trillion from planned federal spending over the next 5 years, in part to pay for a $350 billion tax cut—would eliminate the Education, Energy, and Commerce departments. The Senate version, which slashes a total of $1 billion but provides no tax cut, would keep DOE and Education intact. The House panel, chaired by Representative John Kasich (R–OH), didn't spell out what would happen to the orphaned DOE programs, but it did reject one possible bureaucratic solution—a Department of Science. It's been proposed by Science Committee Chair Robert Walker (R–PA), who promises to revive the idea later this year. However, the House and Senate bills are united in their opposition to the applied research programs that have been the flagship of the Clinton Administration's science policy, with Republicans calling them a costly intrusion into the private sector.

These proposals "shouldn't come as a surprise," Walker told reporters last week, noting that his fellow Republicans had long signaled their intent to go after applied R&D. Surprised or not, Democrats decried the plans, saying that the policy and budget changes pose a threat to scientific progress and to economic growth. "We need science and technology," says presidential science adviser Jack Gibbons. "Rather than a sharp scalpel, the Republicans would take a meat ax approach that puts our nation's future at grave risk." Representative George Brown (D–CA), ranking minority member on the House Science Committee, also sounded the alarm. "This will have terrible consequences for generations to come by undercutting R&D investments," said Brown, adding that the House plan "represents a retreat from the federal government's historical role as a driver in research and development."

Following are highlights of the resolutions before the House and Senate:

■ *NIH:* The House budget plan makes only one recommendation for biomedical research: that funding for NIH be trimmed by 5% in 1996 to "encourage prioritization," followed by a 6-year freeze through 2002. The Senate version, offered by Budget Committee Chair Pete Domenici (R–NM), is more verbose but less precise—and possibly harsher. In the confusion that followed its release, some officials are predicting it would bring a calamitous future, including an immediate cut at NIH of 10% to 20%.

Specifically, the Domenici scheme calls for a 1996 reduction of $2.8 billion in the "health account" at the Department of Health and Human Services, which includes mandatory programs such as Medicaid and discretionary programs in the Public Health Service. This big cut would be followed by a 6-year freeze, as in the House plan. Domenici would also eliminate the office of the Assistant Secretary of Health (something the Administration already plans to do) and cut the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research by 75%, for an estimated combined savings of $169 million.

However, Domenici would like to shield certain areas. Among those he would leave "fully funded" (a term not defined) are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and "all AIDS and HIV-related programs."

So where does that leave the NIH and its

$11.3 billion budget, for which the Administration has requested a 4% increase in 1996? Senate budget committee staffers, who reportedly are forecasting a 10% cut, were not available to discuss details. However, NIH's own financial experts are saying that the cut could reach 18% in non-AIDS programs if all of Domenici's stipulations are followed. Faced with such uncertainty, many people threw up their hands. For example, Assistant Secretary for Health Philip Lee said: "We can't figure out from what [Domenici's staff] have said what they really mean. That's one of the problems. If they said, 'We're going to cut the NIH budget 10%,' the public would react strongly. ... But they've fuzzed it up."

Whatever the final outcome in the budget resolution, NIH can expect more sympathetic treatment from the appropriations committees. In particular, Senator Mark Hatfield (R–OR), chair of the full appropriations committee in the Senate, is expected to fight against major cuts in NIH's budget.

■ *NSF:* The picture is somewhat clearer at NSF, where the resolutions contain comparatively good news for the foundation as a whole but bad news for social and behavioral scientists. Both the House and Senate versions incorporate the $200 million reduction from current levels already requested by the Clinton Administration for academic facilities and major research equipment. The Senate version would lop off $100 million this year from NSF's $2.2 billion research account and hold to that level for the rest of the decade, while the House version would make only a $17 million cut in 1996 and then add about $65 million each year through 2002. The $600 million education program would remain at that level in both versions.

However, the House proposal takes aim at the foundation's $110 million directorate for social and behavioral sciences and economics, with Walker accusing NSF of funding "politically correct" studies out of line with its physical sciences core. In response, Howard Silver, executive director of the Consortium of Social Science Associations, points out that such studies include work cited by conservatives as well as liberals, including analyses of the high economic rate of return from federal spending on basic research and the economic underpinning for the government's billion-dollar auction of radio frequencies.

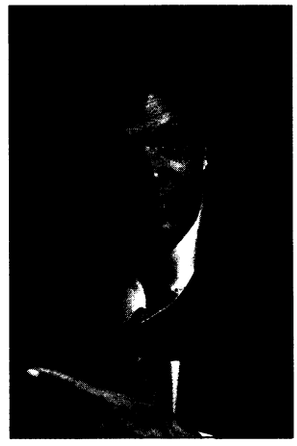
The proposed reductions leave NSF officials wishing fervently for the Administration's request for 7% growth in research. "We'd love to have that number for 1996," says Anne Petersen, NSF's deputy director. "But we know it's going to be a fight to get it."

(continued on page 967)

SCIENCE INTERVIEW

... As O'Leary Struggles to Preserve Energy Department

With her corporate polish and soft Virginia accent, Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary might not look or sound like a formidable Washington infighter. But in her 2 years as head of the sprawling Department of Energy (DOE), O'Leary has proved to be a tough adversary in any political battle. She will need all of those skills in the weeks and months ahead if she is to fend off Republican plans to dismantle her department.



SAM KITTNER

Pointed comments. Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary rebuts efforts to eliminate DOE.

In an interview with *Science* on 11 May—the day the House Budget Committee voted to abolish DOE—O'Leary dismissed the committee's proposals as "unsophisticated" and "anti-science." She also vowed to hold together the diverse missions of her department.

She won't have to do it alone. The chair of the Senate Budget Committee, Senator Pete Domenici (R–NM), is a strong DOE defender who is on good terms with the secretary. And his committee's version of the budget resolution, which lays out a plan to balance the federal budget by 2002, is similar to the realignment scheme O'Leary announced the week before (*Science*, 12 May, p. 794).

"It's not a shocking fact that two of our major national laboratories are in the state of New Mexico," O'Leary says with a smile. "The budget mark that he has put forward is much more compatible with the thinking of our Administration and certainly my personal thinking. We can work with one another."

Her political savvy has already won some important victories. In 1993, for example, she successfully led a coalition of arms control advocates both inside and outside the Administration that persuaded President Clinton to extend a moratorium on nuclear testing in the face of opposition from the national security community, including the directors of DOE's weapons labs. And she has established a reputation for openness within the notoriously secretive department by revealing details of human radiation experiments conducted by the U.S. government for decades.

The past 12 months, however, have been devoted to the thankless task of trying to unify and streamline DOE. It's an $18 billion agency with 27 labs that, among other things, decode the human genome, explore the origins of matter, design nuclear weapons, investigate global change and alternative energy sources, and tend to a half-century of environmental degradation.

A former utility executive who served in the Ford and Carter administrations, O'Leary is not a typical technocrat. She eschews the acronyms that abound in her field and takes stock in the results of public opinion polls. But associates say her poised manner can give way to a sharp temper and a proclivity for swearing behind closed doors. She admits to counting the days she has been in office, but says she plans to remain in the Cabinet at least until the end of Clinton's first term, giving her another 18 months—assuming her department survives that long.

What follows is a transcript of O'Leary's remarks made during her visit to *Science*'s editorial offices, edited for brevity.

–Andrew Lawler

On the House Republican budget plan.

O'Leary: It's bad news for the nation, not just for the Department of Energy, because it's bad news for basic and applied science. Basic science would take a 35% cut—that's 6 billion bucks over 7 years. It almost gives the appearance that the people involved in this exercise had no idea of the value science has, or what it has contributed. It's just shortsighted and foolish.

These [budget levels] simply mean that programs would have to fold en masse. If we withdraw the opportunity to establish scientific procedures for testing nuclear weapons [without exploding them], how can we make greater reductions in our nuclear warheads? We can communicate this very clearly to the American public. Every poll I have read says the public would like to see us downsize our nuclear stockpile.

On a Department of Science [a proposal being pushed by House Science Committee Chair Robert Walker (R–PA) to lump parts of DOE together with nonbiomedical research agencies into a Cabinet department].

(continued from page 965)

■ *Commerce Department:* Although both House and Senate resolutions call for the department's elimination, they acknowledge the need to preserve most of its research components, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). Neither bill spells out where these agencies would end up, however. NOAA's $1.8 billion budget would be trimmed by more than 10% in 1996 and by lesser amounts in future years, while its fleet modernization and shipbuilding programs would be eliminated. At NIST, the extramural Advanced Technology Program and Manufacturing Extension Centers would be wiped out, although the in-house NIST labs would get small increases in their $260 million budget.

"We're standing behind all our technology programs because they've been successful in creating jobs and boosting economic growth and because they are what industry wants," says a NIST spokesperson. "And Mr. Walker says he wants to support good research."

■ *Energy Department:* Applied and basic research would be cut by $6.8 billion over 5 years in the House version, which would eliminate the department. That figure is more than twice the cut proposed by Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary (see p. 965). General science funding, however, would remain between $900 million and $1 billion annually through 2000. The Senate version is more generous, and Domenici, who is also chair of the appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over energy and water programs, opposes the plan to abolish DOE and is a strong defender of the two DOE labs in his state.

■ *NASA:* Although a favorite of Republican leaders for its technological know-how, the space agency wouldn't be spared in the proposed House cuts. About $2.7 billion would come out of the $8 billion Earth Observing System, Walker said, through changes in the way the agency distributes the data. Another $1.5 billion in savings would come from privatizing the space shuttle. The space station, which has bipartisan support, remains intact under the House plan. But NASA's budget would fall as low as $11.6 billion in 2000—almost $3 billion below the 1995 level and below an already bare-bones plan put together by NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin. Walker said NASA should expect $13.7 billion in 1996—$700 million less than this year.

■ *Office of Technology Assessment:* The mood is grim at the $22 million agency, created in 1972 to give Congress the expertise to dissect scientific and technological proposals from the executive branch. Although Gibbons was its director for 13 years before joining the White House, observers say its reputation of producing too slowly reports that are too temperate to influence policy decisions is a mark against it. "We're still here and we're still open for business," says a spokesperson. "But people are starting to think about what to do with their lives, and it's getting weary going to all these farewell parties."

–Andrew Lawler

With reporting by Eliot Marshall and Jeffrey Mervis.

SOCIAL SCIENCE

Bill Threatens Child Survey Research

Understanding children—both for parents and social scientists—isn't easy. And researchers who use surveys to study everything from childhood drug use to AIDS prevention fear the task is about to become even harder. A bill aimed at protecting family privacy, which has already passed the U.S. House of Representatives and stands a good chance of becoming the law of the land, would impose new restrictions on federally sponsored surveys involving children. Social scientists say the restrictions would stifle research on sex, drug use, and other behaviors.

Such surveys "provide the road maps for us in determining what problems we face in our communities," says Tom English, president of the Oregon Council on Crime and Delinquency in Portland. "Shutting off the data valve will just leave communities trying to guess what's going on, making it all the more difficult to know how best to help kids."

The bill, a provision of House Republicans' "Contract with America" known as the "Family Privacy Protection Act," seems innocuous at first: It simply requires federally funded researchers to get written parental permission before asking a child questions about sexual behavior, criminal activity, religion, family members, and three other topics. Supporters, such as Representative Mark Souder (R–IN), say that getting it in writing simply promotes parental rights to influence what their children are exposed to. But social scientists say the requirement could make such surveys inordinately expensive and distort any findings, as the families least likely to return consent forms are precisely those with children who engage in high-risk behaviors. Phyllis Ellickson, a behavioral scientist at RAND, a policy research organization based in Santa Monica, California, says: "This bill is a disaster for research on kids."

Hundreds of such surveys are conducted each year by institutions like RAND, the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR), and many federal, state, and local agencies, including the U.S. Justice Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Such surveys already notify parents in writing about the survey and its contents. They don't, however, always insist on a response—in some cases, unless a parent actively denies permission, researchers assume the child can participate. Surveys also go through reviews to ensure there is no potential to harm the child. "There's already a multilayered process in place to protect human subjects," says Lloyd Johnston, a program director at ISR. This includes institutional review boards at universities and peer review committees at granting agencies.

Proponents of the legislation argue, however, that a parent who doesn't see the survey notice may not know what their child is getting into. "We want express written consent

57. How old were you when you had sexual intercourse for the first time?

a. I have never had sexual intercourse
b. 11 years old or younger
c. 12 years old
d. 13 years old
e. 14 years old
f. 15 years old
g. 16 years old
h. 17 years old or

58. During your life, with

n. 6 or more people

60. Did you drink alcohol or use drugs before you had sexual intercourse the **last time**?

a. I have never had sexual intercourse
b. Yes
c. No

Invasion of privacy? Questions such as these, from a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey of at-risk youth, have prompted legislation to restrict survey research.